Givat Haim? Their first reaction, I felt, would have been one of wonder at the seeming chaos confronting them, for there was no one on the scene who in any way resembled a head of the family, and everyone seemed to speak on an equal basis, irrespective of social rank, sex, or even age. How could our ancestors tell, from clothing, bearing, or language, which were the figures of substance or importance? In these circumstances, I suspect that our ancestors would have been drawn to the young people so prominent in the crowd, tall and well-built, many of whom were speaking Hebrew, the holy tongue, much better than even the most learned men of long-ago Staedtel.

But as I stirred myself from these thoughts, I found I still did not fully understand why we had gathered together. Was it just to see and be seen? Was it to discover firsthand a bit more about who we are and were, how the branches of our family tree had unfolded and grown? Or was there, in addition to personal and intellectual curiosity, perhaps something else animating us: some unnamed feeling of satisfaction or, better, defiance, all the more intense for our having survived history's most ghastly hour?

Whatever in the end drew us together at Givat Haim, it became apparent to me that if dispersal was one way of summarizing what had happened to us as a clan—for we had truly come together from the four corners of the earth—perhaps the real significance of our reunion could only be captured by a term like recovery or, even, normalization.

# Genet Among the Palestinians

*Martin Kramer*

ON THE morning of September 19, 1982, the French writer Jean Genet visited the Palestinian refugee camp of Shatila near Beirut. Two nights earlier, Israel had permitted its Lebanese allies to enter the surrounded camp, and they had massacred its Palestinian inhabitants. A walk through Shatila, wrote Genet, "resembled a game of hopscotch. . . . A photograph doesn't show how you must jump over the bodies as you walk along from one corpse to the next."

The "thick white smell of death" in Shatila inspired Genet to one last self-invention. He had been a thief and prisoner, then a world-famous novelist and dramatist. Now he would be reborn as a witness for the Palestinians. *Prisoner of Love*, his book-length memoir of the Palestinian *fedayeen*, appeared a month after his death in 1986. This was the first new writing Genet had produced in years, and it rekindled an interest in his life and work. A masterful new biography by Edmund White* more than satisfies that interest.

WHATEVER White's intent, he has reminded us that Genet, rather than embodying some collective disorder of his time, acted largely upon his own disorder. White thus finally breaks the spell of Jean-Paul Sartre's long-winded speculation, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* (1952). That book, which canonized Genet at the age of forty-two, purported to be an "existential psychoanalysis," based on Sartre's lengthy conversations with his subject: an abandoned child, vagabond thief, army deserter, and homosexual prostitute who wrote five remarkable books in prison that swept him to the summit of French letters.

But as even Sartre himself acknowledged, Genet practiced certain economies when it came to self-revelatory truth, and so White relentlessly seeks out corroboration. Many of the documents, it turns out, refuse to corroborate.

White first shows how thoroughly Genet's own version of his childhood—drawn in sharp lines of poverty and abuse—was a myth, an affectation given credibility by Sartre. Born in Paris in 1910, Genet had been abandoned by his unwed mother and made a ward of the state. But the carpenter's family that was entrusted with his care gave Genet ample attention and affection. Raised in a farming village, he was not made to work,

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prospered in school, had plenty of books, and scored high on examinations. Contrary to his later claim, he did not have to steal to survive. ("You couldn't call them thefts," recalls one classmate. "He took some pennies from his mother to buy sweets, all kids do that.")

The effect of these first chapters is to suggest that Genet largely fabricated a grim childhood to fit his chosen *persona* as a renegade. Precocious and rebellious, the dandified Genet refused, as he put it, "to become an accountant or a petty official." And so he escaped from every apprenticeship, opting to become a petty thief. This eventually landed him in the notorious reform penitentiary at Mettray, a society of male outcasts governed by a counter-code of homosexuality, theft, and betrayal which Genet would later celebrate.

After stints of military service and desertions, Genet crossed Europe as a vagabond, and finally returned to Paris where he resumed his career of petty thievery and shoplifting, specializing in rare books. ("He may have been a thug," writes White, "but he was a highly literary one.") In the 1940's he was often in prison, where he wrote the novels and poems, beginning with *Our Lady of the Flowers*, which brought him to the attention of Jean Cocteau and the leading literary lights of Paris. They lobbied to save him from the life sentence of a repeat offender, and with the benefit of a pardon, he settled into the role of the barely domesticated bad boy of French letters.

GENET'S "resolute aestheticism" is an acquired taste. His arresting language consistently displays genius, an achievement all the more astonishing in an author who left school at the age of twelve. The themes celebrated in his work—theft, murder, homosexual eroticism—have the usual appeal of that which is deemed "scandalous." The frequent lack of narrative coherence adds a pastiche of the absurd.

White briefly considers each of Genet's works, but only to set them afloat on a river of detail about Genet's couplings and uncouplings, both intellectual and physical. This is dense biography—no bedroom door left unopened, no literary liaison unexplored to its furthest implication.

From the mass of detail, though, White does discern a striking pattern. Genet invested himself completely in a succession of lovers and friends. He shared out his publishers' advances and royalties almost as soon as they were paid, setting up his favorites in houses while he lived in cheap hotels near train stations. But so many of his intimates ended badly, often by their own hand, that even Genet began to wonder whether he cast a malevolent spell. That he could infect others with a particularly virulent nihilism would soon be demonstrated on a larger canvas.

In wartime Paris, when Genet first appeared on the literary scene, he practiced an indifference to politics. He said and wrote nothing political, and took both a German soldier and a member of the Resistance as lovers. In 1952, Genet informed Sartre that "in politics nothing new can be contributed by a homosexual," since the significance of homosexuality was "a refusal to continue the world." He often repudiated political readings of his plays, maintaining that they occupied "a domain where morality is replaced by the aesthetics of the stage."

But the favorable reception of Genet's work owed a great deal to changes in the political weather. This is particularly true of his best-known plays, *The Balcony*, *The Blacks*, and *The Screens*, all written during the 1950's. Through allusions to democracy's corruption, racial oppression, and colonial domination, they tapped the growing self-doubt of France, Europe, and America. The fact that *The Blacks* ran off-Broadway for almost four years beginning in 1961 (with James Earl Jones in a leading role) can only be understood in the context of the rise of the civil-rights movement. And even if *The Screens* was, in White's judgment, "more in praise of unregenerate individualism than of third-world nationalism," it could only be read as an indictment of the war in Algeria, and could only be staged in France four years after de Gaulle pulled out of the war. Even then, angry demonstrators disrupted performances.

When his literary inspiration was finally exhausted, Genet sought in politics a fulfillment that had eluded him in art. His books, he declared, were "part of a dream, a daydream. And since I outlived this dream, this daydream, I had to take action in order to achieve a sort of fullness of life." But which action, and for whom? White observes that Genet thought politics "must be a purge of anger and not a reconciliation of differences." That could only mean violence. But although Genet claimed to detest France, he found no "fullness" in that country's own purges of anger. (He showed up at the Sorbonne during the 1968 student uprising, but refused to address the crowd.)

Abroad, however, various conflicts seemed to embody the stylized contrast of black (men) against white (men) he had dramatized on the stage. "I wish I were black," he told the American novelist William S. Burroughs after he visited Chicago to write up the Democratic convention in 1968. "I want to feel what they feel." The fact that Genet spoke no passable English or Arabic only enhanced the aesthetic charge of the two causes he finally adopted: the Black Panthers and the Palestinians.

GENET'S affair with the Black Panthers brought him briefly again to America in 1970. He visited some fifteen campuses, lecturing in support of the imprisoned Panther Bobby Seale, and rubbing shoulders with such radical celebrities as Angela Davis, Jane Fonda, and Allen Ginsberg. For a while, writing on behalf of the Panthers filled his void: "Literature, as I practiced it formerly, was gratuitous. Today it is in the service of a cause. It is against America." But Genet was never thoroughly taken by the Panthers, who were not the rigorous revolutionaries of his fantasy. Even before they broke up, Genet began his search anew; it now took

him to an ungoverned corner of the kingdom of Jordan.

Genet's sensuality had long been stimulated by the Arab world, beginning with his service as a soldier in Syria and Morocco. But it was the dramatic pose of the Palestinians that moved him to action. Genet described himself as "enthralled" by the Palestinian hijacking of civilian airliners to Jordan in August and ("Black") September 1970; a month later, he was with the *fedayeen* in northern Jordan, at the invitation of Yasir Arafat. The appeal of armed youths bordered on the erotic:

> The first two *fedayeen* were so handsome I was surprised at myself for not feeling any desire for them. And it was the same the more Palestinian soldiers I met, decked with guns, in leopard-spotted uniforms and red berets tilted over their eyes, each not merely a transfiguration but also a materialization of my fantasies.

Genet had found his redemption. He repeatedly returned to Jordan, logging some six months in the remote camps of the *fedayeen*. He freely described his bond with the Palestinians as an "irrational affinity," resting "on an emotional—perhaps intuitive, sensual—attraction; I am French, but I defend the Palestinians wholeheartedly and automatically. They are in the right because I love them."

Unfortunately for the Palestinians, Genet never developed their defense much beyond this. He detested King Hussein, who made war against the Palestinian *fedayeen* in 1970. But did his passion confer more rightness on *his* Arabs than did the lifetime devotion of, say, Glubb Pasha, British adviser to the king, who had commanded and lived among Jordan's bedouin troops? "I went to the Arab countries in 1920 as an ordinary regimental officer in the British Army," wrote Glubb. "I stayed there for thirty-six years because I loved them." Nor was Glubb alone. There are shelves of similarly enamored writing on armed Arabs in the hills and deserts east of the Jordan, beginning with T.E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. It is still possible to read these texts as art, but no one thinks to trust them, and Genet's *Prisoner of Love* is no exception.

GENET did not love the Jews. Sartre wrote that he "played" at being an anti-Semite: "When he's cornered, he announces that he 'could never sleep with a Jew.' Israel can rest at peace." Sartre offered this explanation: "Since Genet wants his lovers to be executioners, he should never be sodomized by a victim. What repels Genet in Jews is that he finds himself in their situation."

Like so much of Sartre on Genet, this speculation completely misses the mark. Genet thoroughly eroticized those other victims of French racism, North African Arabs; an Algerian high-wire artist named Abdallah became his most enduring love. And he later would perceive the Jews as particularly ruthless executioners.

White stays closer to the evidence, but cannot decide. In an introduction he wrote to *Prisoner of Love*, White claimed that Genet, while anti-Zionist, was not anti-Semitic. According to White, Genet saw Israelis as "master manipulators of the media as well as of brainwashing techniques, but his objections are political, not racist. He attacks Israeli policies, not 'Jewish traits' (the very phrase is racist)."

In researching this biography, White did speak to Jews who heard Genet make offensive remarks, and this has persuaded him to pronounce the question of Genet's anti-Semitism "an open one." Still, in Genet's defense, White avers that he never published a single anti-Semitic word, and that he was tied by friendship to several Jews.

But Genet's offhand remarks and friendships are beside the point. For Genet, Jews represented the living affirmation of morality over aestheticism. He felt himself covered by what he called a "thick black layer of Judeo-Christian morality," which he longed to strip away. The Palestinian struggle was very much his struggle precisely because Zionism, along with imperialism, represented "the last incarnations of Judeo-Christian morality, which is itself the master of terms." When Genet wrote that "words are terrible, and Israel is a terrifying manipulator of signs," he meant both Israel in history and Israel the state.

Genet found even the alphabet of the Jews terrifying. Driving from Damascus to Israeli-surrounded Beirut in 1982, he saw Hebrew *signs*—"as painful as seeing Gothic lettering in Paris during the German occupation."

> Most of the letters were squat and rectangular; they read from right to left in a broken horizontal line. One or two had a crane-like plume on top: three slim pistils bearing three stigmata and waiting for the bees who'd scatter their age-old, nay, primeval, pollen all over the world.

Genet recalled these letters from his childhood, carved in stone: the letters of the law, repelling a man who believed in no preexisting law, who affirmed that rules had to be invented by man, that they should be "more aesthetic than moral," and that his own rules were "against the rules, I mean against the law." Israel, armed with its law and its signs, seemed to Genet even more terrible than the Western imperialism it mimed: it was "a loathsome, temporal power, colonialist in a way which few dare to imitate, having become the Definitive Judge which it owes to its longstanding curse as much as to its chosen status."

FOR Genet, who had stood before many judges, Israel's judgment represented the definitive rap, which he could beat only by assimilating himself completely to the Palestinian struggle. He often said that the Palestinians did more for him than he for them. Indeed, they exonerated him.

In return, Genet gave the Palestinians bad counsel. Since Israel could always manipulate words and signs, Genet urged the Palestinians to use violence. Genet, for his part, would teach his own countrymen and Europeans in general

not to "confuse the brutality of the Israelis with the violence of the Palestinians, which in my opinion in any case is good."

In 1972, the terrorist Black September movement seized Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics, an operation that ended in a blaze of gunfire and death. Genet blamed Israel: "This death of the Jews was desired by Israel. It was necessary that 'all Israel should lament,' that the 'Israelites should cry vengeance.'" But to the Palestinians, he acclaimed the "perfect logic" of Black September's decision to carry the struggle to Europe. It was another example of Genet's drawing beloved friends to strategies of self-destruction: Israel quickly took retaliation in Europe, within months claiming the lives of two of Genet's dearest Palestinians, PLO representatives in Paris and Rome.

And in the end, Genet failed to sway European opinion, too. His book on the Palestinians was delayed, and when in 1977 Genet extended his distinction between bad brutality and good violence to a defense of the Baader-Meinhof gang in Germany, it created a furor against him across Europe. From then until his death in 1986, he remained isolated, in the close company of a few Palestinian friends and a Moroccan vagabond, his last lover.

BEIRUT inspired Genet's last creative burst. His "Four Hours in Shatila" displays all that was brilliant and flawed in his committed essays. The description is riveting, as the reader meanders with Genet among the bloated, blackened corpses, observing each in clinical detail. But his political speculations are blurred and skewed, and suggest no exit. Genet could convey something of Palestinian suffering, but he had no plan to alleviate it.

Indeed, such suffering contributed to his own equilibrium. "I would like the world not to change so that I can be against the world," he said. And: "The day the Palestinians become institutionalized, I will no longer be on their side. The day the Palestinians become a nation like other nations, I will no longer be there."

This sentiment is still shared by many other foreign friends of the Palestinian cause. Theirs, too, is a suffocating love. Genet once called Lawrence of Arabia an "impostor," whose supposed friendship toward the Arabs concealed his function as an agent of Western imperialism. But Genet, "prisoner of love," was perhaps the more insidious impostor: an agent of Western nihilism, urging freedom for the unfree, provided they forever remain prisoners of hate.


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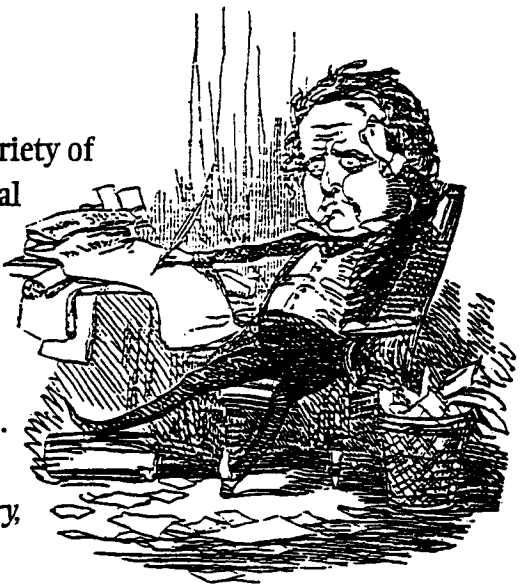

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